

Interview with Charles J. Nelson

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR CHARLES J. NELSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: This is November 18, 1991 and this is an interview with Ambassador Charles J. Nelson on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Mr. Ambassador, could you tell me a little about your background —Where you were born, grew up, your education before we get into your Foreign Service career?

NELSON: I was born in Battle Creek Michigan and attended high Schoothere. I went to Lincoln University in Lincoln, Pennsylvania.

Q: *What was your field at the university?*

NELSON: Public Administration and Political Science. I was drafted upon graduation and returned to the United States in 1947 and did graduate work at New York University in the doctoral program in Public Administration. I have an MPA. I completed my academic studies for a Ph.D. but did not complete the dissertation...I had to go to work.

I worked for New York State for the Commission on Coordination of State Activities, which is a little Hoover Commission type organization, studying the civil service and the Department of Education.

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In 1952 I came to Washington for a week to explore other avenues of employment. After a discussion with Bill Ronan, who was the director of studies at the Commission and also dean of the school where I got my advanced degree, I was offered a job by the Mutual Security Administration at a very meager salary. I was to go to the Philippines as a program assistant in the Public Administration Division. The Commission had a meeting in New York. I was at the Plaza Hotel with some graduate school friends and they said, "Don't take the job. At least hold them up for one more grade." So I said that I would accept but not at the grade which was offered to me. They offered me another grade, which meant that at least I could take an automobile. The only reason I recount this is that subsequently when I used to meet the personnel person who hired me, it was her big joke as to how cheaply they had gotten me.

Q: That wasn't a very encouraging way to start anything, is it?

NELSON: No. But I had a very good boss in the Philippines, Dr. John Russell, a graduate of Syracuse. After six months, I got a two-grade promotion at the earliest opportunity thereafter.

Q: Now, this was the Mutual Security Administration which later developed into AID?

NELSON: Yes.

Q: You went to the Philippines when?

NELSON: 1952.

Q: And you were there until when?

NELSON: 1958 with [one] exception. I went to Cairo, Egypt, John Russell had been transferred to Cairo, with the idea of working with him there in the Public Administration Division. I stayed some 90 to 100 days, then returned to the Philippines via Beirut, Turkey,

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etc. With the Aswan Dam fiasco, my Egypt assignment was off. Then I became deputy chief of the Rural Development Division inaugurated under then-President Magsaysay. I did the local government part of that program.

Q: That must have been an exciting time?

NELSON: It was a very exciting time when I worked within the Public Administration Division. John Russell and I were called in actually, and we worked with Magsaysay's Executive Secretary on the organization of the President's Office. One of the things we did was to set up what was called the PCAC (President's Complaints and Actions Commission) where anyone could come to Malacayang and register their complaint with the government. Or from anywhere in the Philippines one could send a telegram to Magsaysay for 10 centavos.

From this there developed a book called, "Bare Feet in the Palace," about the common man who could come and register his complaint about government. Government had not been responsive to the Philippine citizens under previous presidents. Therefore, this was, in a way, news.

At the same time, I served as an adviser to two presidential commissions, one on licensure and one on the Civil Service. That was in addition to serving as the advisor to the President's redevelopment program.

Also during this time, I went to Iran on TDY [temporary duty] because the mission director, Colonel Brenn had been reassigned. I served there for 60-90 days, came back to the Philippines, and was transferred to Iran. I served from 1958-60 as chief of the Community Development Division.

Q: I would like to go back to the Philippine period to begin with. What were your major problems that you saw how our efforts meshed in with the Philippine government and society?

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NELSON: Major problems? What we were trying to do primarily was to improve the efficiency of certain key agencies of the government - the Civil Service, the budget process, land regulation, etc. We established the Institute of Public Administration, using Michigan State University, which goes on today and is a very effective institution as part of the University of the Philippines.

Helping society is highly segmented. You have the aristocracy which is primarily of Spanish lineage; a civil serving class which could be called a middle class; and then there is the farmer, the cultivator. The cultivator is in a very difficult position, particularly those who [produced sugar], etc. I remember once going to a hacienda where the lady was talking about the persons who worked on her estate. She was talking about the fact that the farmers wanted to vote as they pleased. She was really upset about this. The only thing I said to her was that the Philippines was supposed to be a democracy.

But, back to your question, at least our focus was in terms of improving the efficiency of certain critical agencies of the government (For example, land tenure) so that they could be more responsible. They could become a kind of engine or facilitator of change that needed to take place. And to build institutions which could, with trained Filipinos, continue this process.

As an aside, my wife became the director of the School of Social Work which she organized at the University of the Philippines. I think, in a sense, she did a better job than we did in the U.S. government. When she left, her staff that had been trained in the United States had returned and [the school] was virtually an all Filipino faculty.

As I said, I went to Iran and worked there two years. No man should have to serve more than two years in Iran. I came back to the States and spent a year in Boston, Oxford, Brussels, and Paris, working on Africa.

Q: These were African studies?

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NELSON: Yes. I came back to the United States and then was called by Warren Wiggins, who I had known in the Philippines, and asked if I would come to work on a report to the President on how a Peace Corps or an organization of volunteers might function.

Q: This is the Eisenhower Administration?

NELSON: Kennedy Administration.

So I went over to work with a small number of persons. My section of the report was how a Peace Corps program would function a program that could be administered by a private voluntary organization or the Peace Corps itself.

The Peace Corps came into being by Executive Order and shortly thereafter...I took a first cut at drafting the Executive Order... I went to the Philippines to explain the Peace Corps to the government and then to see if they wanted volunteers or not. My only difficulty was with certain officers in the embassy...the head of the AID mission complained that he would have to screen every Peace Corps volunteer's house if they came there...and the heads of NGOs who said that bringing young people to the Philippines would just sully American history, etc. What it boiled down to was that these individuals really had no confidence in Americans to comport themselves intelligently be they young or old.

Despite that, once the ambassador went with us to see the Foreign Secretary there was immediate acceptance of the Peace Corps. We developed a program there of teaching English as a second language, which had been done a hundred years ago by the Thomasites who came to the Philippines and introduced English as a language.

While I was in the Philippines, I got a call from [Sergeant] Shriver to come to Nigeria where he would be. We had negotiations with the Nigerian government, with the Prime Minister, and some of the regional governors. I also went over to Ghana.

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Q: In Nigeria... After the conquest of the Philippines, for example, we sent a lot of American women to be teachers and they came out with a very fine reputation, but when you get to a place like Nigeria, this is a whole different thing. Did you find that you were dealing in a different environment? How did they react towards what we were planning?

NELSON: It was my first trip to the continent of Africa and I was just as unprepared as anyone else. I was most unprepared for the high prices they charged in the hotels. Africa is and was different. However, they had needs and they felt that the Peace Corps could fill their needs. Education was then, I suppose, the great thrust in Africa. We were fortunate because a UK [United Kingdom] commission had just done a study of the educational system which pointed to the paucity of instruction in certain particular areas. We didn't touch elementary or primary education, because that is very national and is taught in the regional or national language. But we were acceptable and could function at the secondary level. And the Nigerians as well as the British were accepting of the Peace Corps presence.

The only thing that I remember the Nigerian being a bit chary about was the fact that we were indicating that volunteers would come in and live as their counterparts. Balewa, who was the Prime Minister, did express very specifically to Mr. Shriver and to me, that they were trying to improve the living conditions of their civil servants, teachers and that he didn't like people coming over and lowering their standards. Joe Palmer was ambassador to Nigeria at the time and was extremely helpful to the Peace Corps representatives. One of the things we were able to do which seemed to impress the Nigerian officials was to actually talk specifics about the program. For example, when a governor asked when we could engage, I said, "The next day."

Q: *This was 1961 still?*

NELSON: Yes.

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The fact that we could be that responsive where he was not accustomed to such responsiveness on the part of a U.S. agency was no big thing because we were just talking about accepting his list of positions, where he would like Peace Corps volunteers to function. But it captured a kind of spirit in his imagination and maybe in ours too, that here was an organization, Peace Corps, which was flexible, which could respond at least in terms of accepting requests with a certain kind of immediacy.

To make a long story short, I went to Ghana. The ambassador there was Francis Russell, whose daughter was at Swarthmore at the time. She had told her father that he had to have Peace Corps in Ghana. Our reception was positive and helpful. The government accepted the Peace Corps ideas as we expected.

Q: How about Ghana? Ghana was at the height of Nkrumah who, although you were fellow alumni, had sort of staked his reputation on being basically anti-American.

NELSON: Well, one of the gentleman that I spoke to about the Peace Corps was head of the Young Pioneers. He had a picture of Kennedy on the right side of his desk and a picture of Moi on the left side of his desk. He kissed it. He picked up both of them and kissed them. He seemed to be telling me that he accepted Peace Corps.

Q: How receptive was Nkrumah to this?

NELSON: I did not have an opportunity to speak with Nkrumah directly, but ministers and others within his government were willing to accept the idea of Peace Corps volunteers coming to Ghana, and they did go to Ghana. Knowing a little bit about how these governments worked, I don't think that would have happened if he hadn't been accepting.

I stayed with the Peace Corps as the social director of Program Development and Coordination for a number of years (two or three). Then I returned to AID as director of an office that dealt with U.S. private, non-profit resources available to the Africa Bureau. [The position] had been on the organizational chart for a year or so but had not been filled. After

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a couple of months, I told Ed Hutchinson, who is a wonderful person, that the bureaucracy abhors a vacuum and that while this office had existed its function had been secreted away and there really wasn't much point in my being there. So I became director of North African Affairs at the same time Dave Newsom was director of North African Affairs for the State Department.

I went back overseas in 1966 as deputy director in Ethiopia; 1968, to Tanzania as director of the AID mission; 1971, to Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland as the first American ambassador; 1974, as mission director in Kenya.

Q: Going to Ethiopia, you were there from 1966-68. What was the political situation like at the time?

NELSON: Getting ready for what eventually happened. You had the Church; you had Haile Selassie, the Emperor; and you had various groupings within Ethiopia. I would say that the same kinds of problems that gave rise to Selassie's being removed from office were present, except they did not have the leavening factor of a severe food shortage. Everything else was there - the role of the Church, Selassie, and the lack of movement in terms of economic progress, the Tigreans, the Asmara situation, etc. But the one fact that was missing was the drought. I think the drought and the government's reaction to it, or lack of reaction to it, exacerbated what happened. It blew up some time after I left.

Q: From our point of view I suppose the one thing that left later on was Kagnew Station. That was our sort of communications center which was considered at the time very, very important. Was that driving our policy there, would you say?

NELSON: First, Kagnew was unnecessary. It had been overtaken by various different and new technologies. But the United States is loath to change or lose its rationale for doing something. You will find this in Morocco with the same type base we had there. It continued to be an acceptable excuse for doing certain kinds of things. I hated it because it could be asserted that the AID program is the result of this, is paying rent for that, etc. It

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distorts the effort, the economic rationale, and gives the Ethiopians in this particular case some feeling that they don't really have to cooperate and contribute. But Kagnev was in a sense obsolete and we haven't missed it. I don't think we have missed it.

Q: It warped our relationship in that whole area, the Horn of Africa. It was something whose value was suspect even earlier on. At one point I was the INR officer for the Horn of Africa and the first question you asked was, "Well, can't they communicate somewhere else?"

NELSON: This is a digression, but I think about the Philippines, the fact that Clark Field has been overtaken by a force of nature.

Q: For the record, Clark Field was our major air base in the Philippines and last year a volcano basically destroyed it as a base.

NELSON: The naval base is still there, although it was affected by the volcano's eruption. But you have this sort of schism in the Philippines. It makes a contribution to the surrounding areas in terms of bars, restaurants, etc. But I personally feel that the Philippines would be much better off if they didn't have Clark and didn't have Subic Bay. Because look what it does. It permits them to evade their responsibilities to make hard choices, etc., if you get base rent at \$200-250 million a year. The Filipinos are smart people. They have initiative and ingenuity. But they are being run circles around by the Koreans and the rest of the people in the Asian complex because they don't have to work because Uncle Sugar is providing them with the money. Actually, it is a very divisive influence, regardless how you manage it.

Q: Well, this kind of thing never works. It doesn't work in society, putting a military base in an area becomes a crunch over there.

NELSON: The Philippines have resources, if they had to depend upon the nurturing and exploitation of their resources they could get on with it. But because of the fact that you

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have \$250 plus million plus other monies that come into the economy because of these bases, you really don't have to work too hard.

Q: In Ethiopia one of the ambassadors while you were there was Edward Korry. How did you find him, his approach towards AID and how he worked?

NELSON: A great deal of the time I was acting director so I had a fairly close relationship with Korry. Korry, of course, was fighting the battle of Ethiopia and Somalia. I found Korry not difficult to work with at all. At one time he said I had to cut the mission size, so I cut out all the public safety people. He said I couldn't do that. He was fine. What you have to do is carry your case, which is fair.

Q: *He was known as a difficult ambassador.*

NELSON: I know, but on matters of substance, I didn't fine him that way.

Q: *As you saw, what was the main success while you were there of the Ethiopian AID program and what was the least successful?*

NELSON: We had this agricultural school which was part of the University of Ethiopia, which was a fairly successful undertaking. It was difficult to wrench it away from the associated American university, Oklahoma State, that had been assisting the agricultural school. But we were able to do that because Ethiopians were being trained and in sufficient quantities to at least have a run at running the institution on their own. It was during this period that Oklahoma left and the agricultural school didn't fall down. It continued to progress, do research, etc. We also had an involvement in the University of Addis Ababa, which was relatively good.

We had a responsible malaria eradication program. The third thing that we did reasonably well was to train Ethiopians for particular positions in government. To train them in sufficient depth that if one were promoted to this or that position you had somebody to

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fall in behind it. In other words, the development of the human resources of the country, I think, went forward fairly well. As for some of the programs in agriculture we had very, very limited success, if any.

I think the university, which was institution building where you weren't subject to the pullings and haulings of the society, was something that U.S. institutions presumably could do with some adaptation to the local environment. Malaria is a technological event. The school at Gondar was very well respected as an institution for training health technicians.

Q: When you try to get right to farming habits, etc...

NELSON: That is difficult.

Q: Then you went to Tanzania. You were there from 1968-71.

NELSON: Yes, when Nyerere was President.

Q: I was going to say that here was a man who took his socialist teachings and basically ran a country that could be relatively prosperous right to the ground. What is your impression at the time you served there of what the situation was?

NELSON: Nyerere was, and probably still is, a very influential person. He is also capable of changing. It was interesting that when I went to New York, [visited] by the banks and Newport Mining, the question was, "Oh, you are going to that communist country." This is how many people looked upon Tanzania. I did not look at it that way. I looked upon Tanzania as one of the more exciting and enlightening periods of my work, actually. When you juxtapose Kenya and Nigeria, Nyerere said, "We don't want to have the Mercedes tribe here." No one is to get out too far in front of the parade. Some people used to say that if half the people are going to be mired in poverty, then the whole country is going to be. The tea growers, which is a very profitable crop, and the coffee growers, etc. were not permitted to fully exploit their holdings. And I think Nyerere would say now that he

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recognizes that the cultivator, while he may not know the school of economics he is from, is an economic person. The government ignored basic economic principles when it went for this leveling effect. I can work hard, but I don't really get more than the person who is beside me but doesn't work at all. We both receive the same benefit. I think Nyerere would say that that was a mistake today.

In the long run maybe it was better not to have the sharp divisions of a small money elite, intellectual elite and a mass of people that has occurred in some countries which causes a great deal of difficulty. I think Tanzania, at least for the time I was there, was a more united country. It had a really dedicated civil service. I worked with some wonderful people there in the civil service. I heard Nyerere say that he gets a 25 gun salute, has a national anthem, a flag, etc., but they are not free, they are not independent until all of Africa is free and independent. He looked beyond his immediate horizon.

I think Tanzania is coming back, from what I have heard. It had a very, very low period there, but it is coming back. It is coming back from a very, very poor economy but I think you can say that in Tanzania the people are coming back together. That wouldn't be true in Kenya, for example.

Q: No, we are looking at a real divisive society there now. What were the main developments in AID that you were involved in in Tanzania?

NELSON: The Tanzam Road. The Tanzam Railroad was built by the Chinese. We built the Tanzam Road. I went to Zambia to help inaugurate the beginning of actual construction. We had the Canadians, the British, and ourselves all building links of the road.

We worked with the Masai in terms of improvement of their herds.

Q: They were great cattle raisers.

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NELSON: Not to pin them to the land. These are nomadic people; they travel. The thing was to deal with them within their own environment.

Q: One has heard the criticism launched at American programs that we tend to sink wells, etc. which tends to stop the migration which also means deforestation, wearing out of the soil because all the cattle stay by the wells. Was this a problem when you were dealing with this?

NELSON: We did not try to pin them to the land.

Q: Was there any policy division on this—it is cheaper to just sink a well, etc.? Was it fairly understood that the Masai should not be pinned to the land?

NELSON: It wasn't understood. It depends on the country and the people who are working there. The Masai were recognized in Tanzania, unlike other places. You deal with an individual where he is and in the circumstances where he finds himself.

No program that is worth its salt is going to stop at the end of four years. You go and somebody else comes in and may want to change it, but the government has to be committed because while you provide, the United States provides, some of the resources, the majority, come from the country itself. It may not be money. It is labor, policy direction, and all the rest, and you realize that you are very transitory. You are transient. But the government has to live with whatever you and they produce.

Q: We have talked about Kagnev Station driving our program in Ethiopia, how about in Tanzania? You had Nyerere taking a rather strong anti-American view and yet we had a program there. I recall interviewing one ambassador from Burundi or somewhere saying, "Here is a country that is friendly to us and we weren't doing anything. I go over to Tanzania and we are building roads for them, etc. and they spit in our face all the time."

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How did you find the international aspect and American international interests and what you were doing, how did they interplay?

NELSON: Well, I think, to me Tanzania and Nyerere as the president of that country had certain views and expressed them. To me, that is his right. He really doesn't have to toady. In fact, I wouldn't have much admiration for a person, who to gain resources from an external donor would parrot a particular line. Nyerere did not. He was not antagonistic, but if the United States can't stand up to a difference of view on a particular subject against a country like Tanzania, then it shouldn't try to play a role in the world.

Q: But the realities of appropriations, Congress, and everything else must have played a role there.

NELSON: Let me say this. I had two wonderful ambassadors in Tanzania - Tony Ross, and John Burns. No one every said to me don't do this or don't do that. You develop your program through your own sweat really and you have to sell it back to Washington. And there were some good people in Washington in those days. If you could support your program in an economic sense, I won't say political sense, and could indicate that the government was behind it and put forth a very positive rationale, you could carry the day.

Q: In 1971, you were appointed as the first ambassador to Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, is that right?

NELSON: Yes.

Q: How did this appointment come about?

NELSON: John Hannah, former head of Michigan University, visited me in Tanzania and I had taken him around the country and showed him some of the things we were doing. I was suppose to go home on home leave and the Assistant Administrator at that particular point in time, who shall be nameless, said, "I don't think you should come home. You are

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serving under Executive appointment, Nixon is President and I don't know whether I can get you through the White House again to come back." I had been serving in Executive appointments ever since 1966. I didn't particularly like the sound of that. Dr. Hannah raised the subject and said, "Don't worry about anything."

I remember now that Ambassador Ross had asked me what I was going to do after I left Dar es Salaam. I had said that I hoped to come back to Dar es Salaam. Well, he was probing to find out if I knew what the story was, because shortly thereafter I had to go to Ethiopia for a meeting. Maury Williams came out from Washington and at the first coffee break of the meeting he called me and said that I was being proposed as ambassador for these three countries, and that I couldn't turn it down. I said that this sounded like nonsense to me because I had the Assistant Administrator for Africa saying I couldn't come home because as an Executive appointee I couldn't go through the White House again. What is going on here?

Anyhow I went back to Dar es Salaam and then to a chiefs of mission meeting in Madagascar after which I returned to Dar and then went on to Washington. There I went through the confirmation process and during that time people in the State Department, for example, were saying, "Aren't you sort of turned inside out, sort of beyond yourself?" I said, "Not really." So I said to my wife, "Aren't you excited?" She said, "I think AID has dealt with us very well." So there wasn't consternation, and displeasure is too strong a word also, but there was a puzzlement as to why we weren't walking on air. And we weren't walking on air, we continued walking on the ground.

Q: Was this a problem of AID versus State and the Foreign Service saying...?

NELSON: No, not really. I think it was the fact that for officers that stay in the State Department with one goal, one ambition...here comes a guy, his wife along, and he has realized that, and they are saying it is not the most wonderful thing since sliced bread. How can they, it is an affront to us.

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Q: I notice that one gets a little bit removed from these things and when you take a look they seem quite different than at the time when you are going after just the title. Now what was the situation in these three countries, and what were American interests at that time?

NELSON: David Newsom made a deal with Senator Fulbright that because of this ambassadorship there would be only one for the three countries. There would be one USAID guy for the three countries. Except there were three AID people, one in each country. Botswana is the leader in this part of the world. So my Residence was in Gaborone.

Swaziland is a viable country, I think. I had a great fondness for King Sobhuza. But it was a little sleepy. Lesotho was sleepy, too. Botswana is dynamic and alive. It was well led. The president of Botswana was a great man, a great person. There is a country that has tremendous wealth: diamonds, coal, copper, cattle, etc.

What were the U.S. interests? I wish I knew. Botswana was well-functioning, multi-party democracy.

Q: That is true of a lot of places. You want to keep a presence there. At that particular time you had all sorts of things going on in the area. I am thinking of Angola, Namibia, and the whole South African problem. These must have been reflected...did you get involved in these things?

NELSON: I was besieged by reporters every time I came through South Africa. But my answer to them always was, "I am not the ambassador to South Africa and will not comment on South African politics." We had meetings in South Africa - Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and the Portuguese territories. I am not particularly naive, but I almost dropped my teeth when the consul generals from those countries came forward to say they would never be free, always be colonies.

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To me, Botswana is a kind of anchor in that area. Botswana is resolute; it has resources; it has a great civil service; it is well led. It has a drought every now and then. But it deals politically relatively astutely with South Africa. Now it has the Caprivi strip up there. I remember when Bush came across to Botswana.

Q: That was when he was Vice President?

NELSON: That was when he was ambassador to the UN.

We were standing here and over there was a door with SAP on it, South African Police, because of that little cut in that strange piece of geography.

We fed Zambia which couldn't feed itself in terms of meat. We gohold of a Hercules and flew beef to Zambia.

I even put Botswana ahead of Zimbabwe in some ways. It probably is not as advanced as Zimbabwe, because it hasn't had that overlay of colonialism, etc. But Botswana is a country that has come forward. I think it has the highest foreign exchange holdings of any country in Africa. They are just so damn reasonable.

I used to give parties at my house and there would be a line of pickup trucks in front, although these were ministers. Each one had his cattle post and they went back to the countryside on the weekends.

Q: They weren't part of the Mercedes clique that developed in smany places like Kenya and Nigeria that really ruined the country.

NELSON: They all drove Chevrolet pickups.

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Q: How about things like the b#te noire of most ambassadors in countries in Africa and non-aligned places, the United Nations votes. You had to go with a shopping list each time the General Assembly met to get votes supporting whatever our position was.

NELSON: The one issue we had in Botswana was on the China question—one or two Chinas. I went to Seretse, I had a demarche, and we said our pieces. He said, “Now let's have tea.” We were good friends. But they didn't vote with us. And to show you how some of the people think, I had worked on the Taiwanese representative and gotten him to try to see Seretse.

We were at a dance and Seretse was there. I had gotten an exchange of cables from Washington, which I did not initiate, saying that Rogers was going to call Seretse.

Q: *Secretary of State, Rogers.*

NELSON: And so I would look at my watch and finally went over to Seretse and said that I thought it was time he got over to the State House because Rogers was going to call him. He said, “What is he going to talk about?” I said, “You know quite well what he is going to talk about.” Anyhow, he left, I left. I got home, my telephone rang, and a voice said, “This is Secretary Rogers' office in Washington, is President Seretse Khama there?” I said, “This is my residence. The President is not in my house, he is in his own house. If you are going to call him you have to call State House.” This was such a big deal, they were thinking that I had him by the hand and was leading him through his paces. This is an independent country. If he doesn't take our representation as to why he should vote such a way on the China issue, so be it. We did our best. He went the other way. Almost a year later we were back making the same arguments in reverse.

Q: *Were the Soviets doing anything in Botswana that we werconcerned about?*

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NELSON: They lived right across the street from us actually. No. That came later on as well. Botswana was a little bit loath to take Soviet aid because of South Africa. But then it did.

Q: Were there any great crises while you were there from your point of view?

NELSON: Frank Glenn, who had been the Ford Foundation representative in Tanzania, came to Botswana before I did. There were two things that we did. I wrote a recommendation for Seretse to get an honorary degree from Princeton, and I think he got it.

The other thing was, Botswana was in the throes of negotiating copper and certain other things with outside companies—Anglo-American, etc. They would come out with lawyers from the best firms in the United States. My role was to convince the Attorney General that you have government lawyers just like the companies have their lawyers, but they had to go out and get legal expertise to help them negotiate with you. So Frank Glenn and I got together and got a lawyer, well-known, not an American, to come in and work with the government and with the Attorney General who really wasn't up to the task of dealing with these issues. We had to stress that the company lawyers were not adequate to the task of dealing with him either, because they had to hire outside persons also. So there was no tarnish on him or the government, because they did the same thing. It just helped to level somewhat the playing field.

I think because so many countries have resources, they just barter them away. That was to get Botswana in a sense to hang tough. This was favorable to American interests because the Botswana didn't feel they got cheated out of anything. Botswana right now, for example, not only produces diamonds, but it sits on the trust that determines the market value of diamonds worldwide. So not only are they a separate little country producing fodder for someone else to deal with, but they are there all the way up the line including added value and everything else. They are a determinant as to how many

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diamonds are marketed from this place and that place. So, to me that is a leap, and another feather in their cap.

Q: You left Botswana in 1974 and went back to being director of the AID programs to Kenya from 1974-78. Kenya has always seemed like a peculiar society. It seems to be a country that has a lot of riches but lately seems to be falling apart. The political system doesn't seem to be holding up very well. The criminality seems to be going up. How did you find Kenya when you were there at this particular period?

NELSON: Moi was Vice President and he is of the Kalenjin tribe, a very, very minor tribe. Kenyatta was President most of the time I was there. He was, of course, a Kikuyu, the dominant tribe.

Kenya was a different kind of deal. There had been five AID mission directors before I came. They ceded away over time a lot of the authority and power of the mission. So you had to recapture what you could, plus we had several regional aid organizations. We had domestic issues as well as other issues.

I will just tell you a few stories. I had assembled a relatively good staff over time. I had one real crackerjack, a woman, who is now the highest ranking in the Foreign Service in AID. We went to see the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance and Planning. I introduced the two people who had accompanied me and myself. We sat down and the Permanent Secretary said, "My name is Nganga. You wouldn't know how to pronounce it anyhow." I went on ignoring that and told him what we were there for. The room was ice cold, figuratively speaking. We walked out. It was really chilly.

We made one good friend in the Ministry of Finance and it was through him that we did a great many things. We brought a program which was virtually nil back to a point where it was very respectable, despite some elements in the government and others.

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I will tell you one other story about this friend of ours in the Ministry of Finance. He took us to his parents' home. It was in the rural area. We had a meal prepared by his parents. There were no facilities there so he stopped by someplace where there were facilities after we had finished. It made me extremely proud because here was a person who was willing to, in a sense, expose his circumstances, if you want to use that kind of expression, but he wasn't standing on ceremony; this is what I am, what I come from; I trust that you can accept a situation like this without ridicule and with understanding; this is a real demonstration of how comfortable I feel with you as a person. I spent four years in Nairobi and that was a high point for me.

But, we did have a good program. We developed an extremely gooprogram.

We saw the beginnings once Vice President Moi came in of people beginning to be more bold in terms of their larcenist conduct. I attribute it to one thing primarily and that is that the Kikuyu tribe had been dominant for such a long time. Moi was from a very minor tribe, Kalenjin. He and his associates used his office to loot. I don't think expressions that you read in the paper by the American ambassador do any good for the United States - "We will provide humanitarian assistance. The rest of us are gone. When you fellows come to your senses, we will talk." But he is defiant.

Q: There was just a tremendous upheaval in Zambia where Kaunda allowed free elections and he was thoroughly trounced, conceded defeat, and walked out slowly into the sun set in a gentlemanly way.

NELSON: He and Nyerere were the two who have walked away. Nyerere did so before he was defeated. Kaunda walked away in defeat. Unfortunately Moi and some of the others can't quite do that.

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We became increasingly apprehensive in terms of thuggery. We had to put a lock on our bedroom door and had loud sirens and guards through the night, etc. It was becoming a very disruptive society.

Q: What were the main thrusts of our AID program then?

NELSON: We were in the university, agriculture, commodity lending, PL 480 programs, and small farm loans. That is about it.

Q: Nairobi is such a nice place irrespective of the thuggery. There is a tendency for operations to locate there—any type of organization in our government. Was there a problem of keeping your staff down and not getting too many regional people there?

NELSON: It was a regional location for AID, including the Economic Development Services Organization of AID. It was fairly large. We had the Auditor General there and that too was a large office. Then we had the AID mission. I think we could have done better if we had fewer people. But on that side of Africa, you couldn't go to Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam, the Sudan, Zaire, etc. Kenya was certainly the best place for the East and West offices. I didn't care for it because you get offices besides your own located in places that belong to the same organization and idle hands want to get into your business. They want to tell you how to do your work. I made no bones about it in the sense that I rejected this main approach. It didn't help me much with AID/Washington, but so what.

Q: Then to just finish this subject, did you leave AID in 1978?

NELSON: Yes.

Q: Having been on both sides, how did AID and the sort of traditional State Department Foreign Service work together in Africa as you saw it?

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NELSON: It depends on the personality of the ambassador in the first instance. Also I think it depends on whether he is career or non-career. Bohlen, for example, in the Philippines said, "Don't bother me. You are big boys and you ought to be able to do your business and if you get into trouble you have had it," In Ethiopia, Korry was more intrusive, because he has a lot of nervous energy. He is a highly energetic person. I think he has at least 10 blue striped suits and a blue shirt, blue or red tie, and black shoes. He never appears any differently. He never has to think about that. So the only thing he thinks about is what he can get into. So he is intrusive and you have to deal with that. Sometimes an ambassador's staff can stir up a lot of trouble.

In Tanzania, John Burns and Tony Ross couldn't have been better. They told me very firmly and frankly what they see as their responsibilities and what were my responsibilities, etc. AID directors do have more meaningful contacts with the government, more contacts concerning purpose, policy and principle than in a sense any other U.S. employee in country x or country y. And you have resources that you can deploy.

During the previous years that I spent as an ambassador, I had an AID person who had worked for me and who was in charge of AID for the three countries. There was the Peace Corps and USIS. I tried to work with all segments of the government - to call on ministers, and know ministers and call on the president. We had to learn that you don't run the other U.S. agency's show. Sure you want consultation with them. You want them to feel that they can talk with you. But you don't [interfere]. Even though you are buddies and have worked together elsewhere, you are not in charge of their affairs. So that is a transition you have to make.

Kenya was a very tough place for me in the sense that there were five mission directors, acting, etc. They had lost the mission director's house office. The Agency had paid \$25,000 to improve it. Because maybe the people were weak and because you had so many AID organizations, they were able to play off one against the other. So much of the

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authority of the mission had been ceded, it made it difficult to impose the personality of the mission.

I had some tough times with Marshall, who came from Madagascar, where I think he had been PNGed. He was a contributor to the Nixon campaign and his mother's picture, Mrs. Astor, was on the cover of The New York Times Magazine yesterday. He was to me a disaster. His DCM [deputy chief of mission] wasn't any better. I think I did the job that had to be done there. It wasn't always the most comfortable circumstance and you fought that alone.

This is a generalized observation. Embassy substantive officers gather information without responsibility for specific programs. They are reporters. The State officers turn to this agency or that agency, whatever the case, in terms of wanting to get into your business where they shouldn't be in your business. My program officer consulted or briefed the economic counselor of the embassy often. If there were messages going out, maybe she would discuss them with him. This is routine in any country you might be in because the economic counselor is usually designated to look at AID affairs.

I was in the State Department, but I was not of it. Going back to x country or y country, you had a real disadvantage because they don't want you. Most in the Service have the idea that they are going to be an ambassador, and when he sees someone from the outside, they think he or she doesn't belong. In some way, that is an affront to them that this person has this particular role to play. Therefore, there is a tiny bit of jealousy, which is not endemic, but it exists amongst certain people in the club. They resent your salary, because AID people advance more quickly than Foreign Service types. He is also most likely from a school other than an Ivy League school. You are accepted but tolerated.

Q: I come out of the consular specialty and find that although I came in the regular way, I am still different. In the wrong cone. It is a compartmentalized society.

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NELSON: Yes, it is. Dave Newsom and I used to have some interesting exchanges when he was director of North African Affairs. I fought very strongly from the Washington standpoint as the office director (I was the first black office director.) so that they wouldn't run over my mission directors.

Q: I want to thank you very much. I really appreciate this.

NELSON: Well, I went on and on.

Q: No, this is exactly what I want. Thank you.

End of interview